

Texas House of Representatives
Committee on Higher Education
COVID Charge, Request for Information

The University of Texas at El Paso

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COVID CHARGE:**The Committee seeks the following information related to the COVID-19 Pandemic:**

1. Are institutions of higher education ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty and staff during the 2020 fall semester? When applicable, please speak directly to classroom and lab settings, dormitories and dining halls.

In the 2020 spring semester, the administration at The University of Texas at El Paso took quick steps to transition from in-person to online instruction. Similar measures have been taken this fall to protect the health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff, while suppressing COVID-19 as much as possible. UTEP began its fall semester with 79% of instruction online, 17% of instruction as a hybrid format, and 4% of instruction face-to face.

The University has set up a screening website for students, faculty, staff and visitors who come to campus, requiring them to record symptoms – or lack thereof - daily. Additionally, UTEP has set up a proactive Coronavirus testing program to test students, faculty, and staff who are required to be on campus. Testing will be maximized during the first two weeks of the fall semester, and results from tests are available within 24-48 hours. The test samples never leave the campus. Furthermore, the University has instructed each Principal Investigator, Department Chair, Office Manager and Director to develop a written work and safety plan to resume operations.

Employees in the athletics department are also regularly screened for COVID-19. Employees displaying symptoms of COVID-19 will be sent home. When at work, athletics department employees must follow proper hygiene and social distancing guidelines, which includes, but is not limited to: washing hands when arriving to work, wiping down common spaces and shared equipment, adhering to social distancing guidelines, wearing a face mask, and follow athletics department's goals for returning to work

Students living in on-campus housing have been assigned to private quarters, even with multiple students living in the same unit. There are strict limits on the number of students allowed in common places, such as laundry rooms, study rooms, computer labs, recreation equipment. Hand sanitizer is available in high traffic areas, and cleaning supplies have been provided at front desks for student checkout, if necessary. Students are required to regularly clean their personal living spaces, which are randomly checked every three to four weeks by Housing Staff.

All students are required to wear face coverings in public areas, except for personal apartments. Following a strict schedule with assigned days and times, students moved into their housing between August 17 and August 23, 2020.

Students showing COVID-19 symptoms and who are unable to return home will be provided with a temporary apartment for on-campus isolation (16 apartments are currently set aside for this purpose). Housing services will disinfect any apartment used for this purpose 72 hours after the student leaves the unit.

UTEP will continue to abide by CDC, state, local, UT System, and University guidelines to ensure that students have a safe place to live for the 2020-2021 academic year.

2. What plans are in place for on-campus COVID-19 testing? Do institutions have the capacity to provide testing on campus, both in terms of available supplies and labs to process tests?

UTEP plans to use its expertise as a Tier 1 Research University to test asymptomatic faculty, staff, and students who will be on campus, with a priority to suppress disease on campus. The University is maximizing testing during the first two weeks of the Fall 2020 semester. Test samples do not leave campus and results are available within 24-48 hours. This Proactive Testing Program is being led by faculty in the Border Biomedical Research Center, Biology, Health Sciences, and Mathematics.

3. If applicable, what are plans for collegiate athletics this Fall? How will student athletes be kept safe? If fans will be permitted to attend events, how will fans be kept safe?

Intercollegiate athletics at UTEP will proceed this Fall with the goal of fostering a safe, open environment for student athletes to compete and for fans to participate. Suppressing the disease in the community, and protecting the health, safety, and well-being of student-athletes, athletic staff, venue staff, and fans remains paramount. As a Conference-USA school, UTEP will comply with all rules, regulations, and guidelines published by the conference, as well as those mandated by NCAA and federal, state, and local COVID-19 task forces.

All student-athletes returning to UTEP have been required to fill out a screening questionnaire online to disclose any symptoms, travel, previous testing, or other factors associated with COVID-19. Completion of this questionnaire was required within 3-5 days of arrival to El Paso and before any student-athlete was allowed in any UTEP athletic facility. After completion, domestic students were granted permission to enter UTEP Athletic facilities; International students were required to self-quarantine for a duration determined by UTEP Environmental Health & Safety. The length of time was dependent upon the country from which the student-athlete departed.

All student-athletes were tested for COVID-19 upon arrival at UTEP, regardless of previous COVID-19 status, unless a positive status were proven within 90 days prior to their arrival. If a student-athlete had previously tested positive for coronavirus, he or she was required to provide a copy of the test results along with the date of confirmation. Student athletes who had previously tested positive were required to complete an EKG before being cleared to play.

When entering athletic training rooms, student athletes are required to wear masks, adhere to social distancing guidelines, and have their temperatures taken. Athletic training room equipment is thoroughly cleaned between use.

Student athletes are repeatedly tested weekly through the UTEP Coronavirus Proactive Testing Program. Should a student athlete, staff member or other athletics personnel test positive for COVID-19 at any time, the Director of Sports Medicine will be notified; positive students will quarantine – either on or off-campus, depending on the student athlete’s place of residence. Additional plans are in place for potential team shutdown and quarantine, return to play following a positive COVID-19 test, and student-athlete travel.

Fans attending athletic events this fall must also adhere to COVID-19-specific guidelines. Face coverings will be required for attendance, and traditional fan activities have been removed to comply with social distancing guidelines.

At the Sun Bowl, gates will open 30 minutes earlier than usual to facilitate fan entry for social distancing. There will not be general population seating for this season; all seating will be assigned. Patrons will be asked to adhere to social distancing guidelines, COVID-19 protocol will be posted throughout the stadium, and sanitizing stations will be available, with the recommendation that fans utilize these accommodations liberally. Concession workers will receive safety training based on COVID-19 parameters, with Plexiglas dividers installed at each concession stand. At the conclusion of athletic events, fans closest to the exit will be asked to depart first, followed by the next section of fans until the stadium is clear. The first football game is scheduled for September 5, 2020.

4. What do projected enrollment figures and formula funding look like to institutions for this school year?

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted quick changes in higher education. While other universities in the UT System saw a decline in enrollment after measures were taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, UTEP saw an unprecedented increase in summer enrollment, up 15% semester credit hours from the previous year. Fall 2020 enrollment is also currently trending up at an increase in semester credit hours of 1% and enrollment numbers are expected to remain at consistent levels during for the Spring 2021 semester. Increased enrollment in both summer and fall are within the formula funding base-period measurement and will potentially increase the formula funding received. However, state-provided formula funding depends on the availability of funds provided by the State and the allocation method used to derive each institutions’ allocations.

5. Has there been a noticeable impact on staff or faculty retention with regard to concerns about the pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic prompted an immediate shift in operations at UTEP. The University’s top priorities remain focused on suppressing the disease and ensuring student safety, while also providing a quality educational experience to prepare student entry into the regional, state and national workforce. On March 30, UTEP transitioned to solely online instruction and distributed laptops and hotspots for students who did not have adequate internet access off campus. Additionally, the University expanded outdoor Wi-Fi access on campus and refreshed 300 laptops for faculty. Despite these

abrupt changes to traditional course delivery, UTEP had relatively few faculty opt for retirement over adaptation to distance learning for the foreseeable future. Some faculty members chose to remain with the University as a result of economic uncertainties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, UTEP has not experienced a noticeable impact on faculty retention due to the pandemic.

7. How have state and federal COVID-related funds already impacted budgets?

While the federal funds received have helped offset portions of the infrastructure costs needed to expand remote-learning course capacity and course development, additional long-term investments have surpassed costs covered by these funds. The University expects further investments in classroom space, additional safety measures, and cleaning equipment, which will ultimately cause a strain on and already-limited budget.

As of August 25, 2020, UTEP's current recovery level permits Low Density Operations. The University will continue testing non-symptomatic individuals on campus for the fall semester to limit the spread of COVID-19 as much as possible. Until a vaccine is available, UTEP is prepared to modify campus operations as needed to protect the health and well-being of students, faculty and staff. The investments necessary to offer a safe campus for students, faculty, and staff will impact budgets until a vaccine is available and COVID-19 no longer constitutes a threat to the region's population.

9. Does your institution have a public, online dashboard for the reporting of positive COVID-19 cases which is updated daily? If so, what is the link to the dashboard?

UTEP does not currently have a dashboard.